



Hungary Needs to Re-embrace Western Democratic Values

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Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Meeks, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is a great honor to be asked to testify before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats on developments in Hungary and U.S.-Hungarian relations. If my friend and mentor, the great Hungarian-American, Congressman Tom Lantos, former Chairman of this Committee, was still with us, he might not be too happy about the reasons for this hearing. Tom taught me more about the dignity of standing up for our views out of love of country, about the importance of building bridges, about why strong ties to the United States is vital to Hungary's future than any other person.

Mr. Chairman,

The last few years, I am confronted all too often with the simple question: “What is going on in your country?”

The question is as troublesome as the answer is self-evident: Why would you want to hold a hearing on a European ally, unless there are serious concerns? I wonder—when was the last time you had a hearing about Denmark, Norway, or the Netherlands?

Before I proceed, allow me to clarify my own position and outlook. I am a proud Hungarian patriot who feels passionately about the present and future of my country. Hungary must be a vital part of the community of democracies, a rock solid and unwavering member of NATO and the European Union, and a strong and steadfast ally to the United States. This is certainly what the majority of Hungarians want as well. It is my duty as a concerned Hungarian to help find ways to assist Hungary to return to the path it embarked upon twenty five years ago. For this to happen, our strong relationship with the United States is key. Specifically, it is critical to the health of Hungarian democracy for the United States to make clear its concerns. Sometimes heartfelt criticism, based on the wish to see a friend and ally succeed, must also be a part of that relationship.

I see this hearing as a clear opportunity for the Congress of the United States to send a message to the Hungarian people that Hungary matters. They should know that U.S. lawmakers are watching, and that they are puzzled and, at times, worried about some trends in Hungary and certain decisions taken by the



government. Please note that I have no party political affiliation. I have criticized previous Hungarian governments for decisions they have taken as well. In fact, I left public service during a previous government, prompted by my deep disagreement with the line that government was taking on foreign policy, which in my view was harmful to both the country and to the transatlantic relationship. It has always been and will remain my intention to help Hungary get back on track, to be a strong and vibrant democracy with no doubts about where it belongs.

But I am also here before this Committee as a professional student of transatlantic relations. What I see, and what we are all witnessing these days, is that Vladimir Putin's Russia is playing a key role both openly and behind the scenes in the weakening of democracies and the activation of anti-American sentiments in many parts of Europe. I see present-day Russia not as a constructive partner, but as a disruptive power which has embarked on a road to drive a wedge between the U.S and its allies. Supporting so-called "illiberal," quasi-authoritarian governments and supporting both extreme right and extreme left movements in Europe is part of Russia's strategy in the 21st century. I am sorry to observe that Hungary's weakened democracy makes it very vulnerable to Russian meddling.

The State of Democracy in Hungary

Mr. Chairman,

Twenty five years ago Hungary was a pioneer, a beacon of hope for democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe. It was at the vanguard of change, a country that embraced political diversity, the rule of law, the construction of strong institutions of democracy after forty years of communist rule. It isn't any longer. A few years ago it veered off the course dreamed of by the first democratically elected prime minister, a great friend of America, József Antall.

In 2003 the respectable Bertelsmann Foundation placed Hungary at the very top of the list of 120 'developing' countries in terms of quality of democracy. The country received 10 out of 10 for its 'democracy status' and its overall status-index was 9.71. By 2014 Hungary's 'democracy status' score dropped to 7.95 and its overall status index decreased to 8.05. For the first time, the country was labeled a 'defective democracy' and the 2014 country report registered the "dismantling of democratic institutions" in Hungary.

In 2010, the ruling FIDESz party won the elections by a landslide 52.73%. Due to the construction of the electoral system, this resulted in a two-thirds super majority. Four years later, thanks to the newly introduced election law which was regarded by the opposition and by the international monitoring agencies as deeply biased in favor of FIDESz (The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe pronounced the 2014 election free but unfair), 44.5% of the vote was enough to achieve the two thirds, i.e. constitutional, majority in Parliament. I had my concerns already back in 2010 about the dangers of moving so close to absolute power. For a short while I nurtured some hope that this exceptional opportunity would be used to cement democracy, not the power of one party; to strengthen and not weaken institutions of democracy; and to build a strong consensus rather than sow hatred and division. I was hoping that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán would heed the words of a genuine conservative, the great Winston Churchill, who said: "In War: Resolution. In Defeat: Defiance. In Victory: Magnanimity. In Peace: Goodwill." I was also hoping that Hungary would opt to be an example for democratization further east. I was soon disappointed.

No time was wasted in adopting a new constitution, the "Basic Law". A constitution, as it is commonly referred to, is the supreme law of a state. It must be the expression of the will of the people as a whole. Unfortunately, the two-thirds majority in the legislature was interpreted as a license to unilaterally change the fundamental rules governing the country. The people of Hungary were not part of the drafting of this new constitution. There was no real debate. "Consultation," as the government called it, was short and minimal. A referendum was ruled out as "unnecessary".

After serious criticism from abroad, including from the United States, some cosmetic amends have been made, but have not substantially altered the basic problems of the constitution: that it is not one based on the standards of 21st century democracy. In the wake of the new constitution, which has since been repeatedly amended in its face by the same supermajority, control over governmental power, checks and balances have been weakened. A number of legal initiatives struck down by the Constitutional Court as unconstitutional were immediately incorporated into the Constitution, and the government restricted the competence of the Constitutional Court to examine the constitutionality of financial, budgetary and tax laws. The government believes in a strong, all-powerful state that has the right to interfere in the functioning of the markets, determine the curricula in every single public school in the country, and create a hierarchy among religious groups. In spite of the repeated requests by the U.S. government for the respect of religious freedom the parliamentary majority stripped a number of religious groups of their status as churches. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that these decisions breached the freedom of religion and the freedom of association.

There is no other democratic country in the European Union where power is concentrated as much as in Hungary today. In the Prime Minister's own words: the concept of "checks and balances is a U.S. invention that for some reason of intellectual mediocrity Europe decided to adopt and use in European politics." I believe he is wrong. In my view this is a universal principle of democracy.

Let me say a few words about the poor state of the media. According to the respectable organization "Reporters Without Borders" Hungary has fallen in its ranking by 42 places since 2010, when it was considered one of the 10 freest countries for journalists in the world, occupying 65th place out of 180 in 2015. In their report, Reports Without Borders states that independent media is under continued pressure.

For years, the Prime Minister denied the non-democratic characteristics of the new political order, but in his controversial July 24, 2014 speech delivered at Tusnádfürdő, Transylvania, he proudly disclosed his preference for an "illiberal state" to replace the supposedly failed Western model, leaving no doubt about the direction in which he thinks Hungary is supposed to move.

The Looming Dangers of Extremism

Mr. Chairman,

A strong and self-confident, independent civil society whose rights are protected and considered precious, are essential to the health of any democracy. The harassment of Hungarian civil society in the past few years is a shame. Life for civic organizations benefiting from foreign funds, among others the Norway grants, has been made difficult. Portraying them as foreign agents rings a bell; thirty years ago, before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the same argument was used against the nascent FIDESz. Have members of FIDESz the formerly anticommunist opposition leaders, forgotten in just twenty five years how before 1990 they too used to be harassed and followed by the authorities? Have they forgotten how the United

States provided them protection? How the then U.S. Ambassador Mark Palmer clashed with official Hungary of the day in their defense?

Historically Hungary has benefited from diversity, for opening its borders to others. Hungary is made up of Hungarians, Slavs, Germans, Gypsies, Romanians, Jews, Turks, just to name a few nations, and people that have influenced us and made us the resilient nation we are. Hungary should forge “unity out of diversity,” which will make it stronger and more resilient. It needs inclusion, not exclusion. Recent statements by the Prime Minister that Hungary must close its borders to foreigners, his portrayal of foreigners as a threat, is unbecoming of a European country that is made up of peoples of such diverse backgrounds. It is also dangerous. The Hungarian government cannot in one breath fire up xenophobia and expect countries like Germany, the UK and others to accept—as they do!—about five-hundred thousand Hungarians who have moved to these countries driven by a hope for a better life. It cannot expect to credibly defend the rights of the often discriminated Hungarian minorities abroad, while it is intolerant and unaccepting at home.

About the looming dangers of extremism, which thrives on populism, feeds on the fears of society from the future, I want to state that Hungarians as a rule reject extremism. Unfortunately extremism, laced with xenophobia, anti-Roma and anti-Semitic hatred is present in the country. The rise in support for the extreme right Jobbik party is to a great extent due to the failure of mainstream politicians in addressing people's concerns. Although extremists still constitute a minority, I am worried about the way the Prime Minister has adopted some of the extreme right's rhetoric in recent months. Comments like these worryingly narrow the difference between FIDESz and Jobbik, considerably weakening the argument often used, that his party is the defense of last resort against extremism. One wonders if these efforts aren't the result of Mr. Orbán's and FIDESz' sliding popularity.

Hungary must revert to a system that embraces checks and balances and the clear and unquestionable separation between branches of power. It needs to champion tolerance and acceptance. Hungary must be a country that helps build consensus within NATO and the European Union and profess our shared democratic values. Taxpayer-sponsored state media should not be the mouthpiece of one party. It needs to support a level playing field for all parties who accept democratic rules. Hungary needs to be a country where laws cannot be changed almost overnight, where Parliament is a place of real debate and consensus building, and not just a place of rubber-stamping. Finally and perhaps most importantly, Hungary cannot become a country of favoritism and graft, of nepotism and uncontrolled power of the few. Laws and accountability must be for all.

Hungarian Foreign Policy and Energy Dependence

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to discuss some aspects of present day Hungarian foreign policy.

Twenty or so years ago, I raised eyebrows in the foreign ministry for siding with Mr. Orbán. I did this with a strong conviction about his transatlantic and democratic credentials and his respect for what we in Europe call liberal ideals, and what Americans would call Western values. I served under him as Ambassador to NATO, and remember his steadfast leadership and strong transatlantic credentials during the Kosovo war. This is perhaps important in order to underline the fact: I have no personal reasons for criticism of him.

Hungary basically fulfills its obligations as a NATO member; our soldiers continue to make important contributions to NATO led operations. I was glad to see the government's recent decision to support the U.S. in the fight against ISIS. I was not just disappointed, but outright angered by the pettiness of some opposition parties, including the Socialist Party, not to support the government in this important mission. When Hungarian soldiers put themselves in harm's way, they need to know, that the nation is behind them. Alliance solidarity should not be prey to petty politicking.

The Prime Minister has dramatically modified his previously unqualified pro-Western stance in last years. He has most recently suggested, that autocratic regimes are more efficient than democracies, which in his view tend to get lost in debates. In the name of defending Hungarian sovereignty, he did not shy away from frequent confrontations with the European Union while pursuing a new economic and more importantly political opening to Russia. He held up Russia, Turkey and Singapore as models for the country, not exactly examples of forward looking and inclusive democracies. I was hoping that the Prime Minister would be at the forefront of pushing back on Russian aggression in Ukraine, that he would be the most vocal critic of what Russia is doing abroad and also of what it has become at home: an autocratic regime. I am deeply disappointed on both counts.

Less than a year after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Hungary became the first member of NATO and the European Union to receive the Russian leader, giving him red carpet treatment. In a cordial atmosphere, Putin and his Hungarian counterpart signed five bilateral agreements, but it was the fact of the visit itself and its timing that is disturbing to me.

I would like to quote a statement made by a government minister recently, "Hungary is simply too dependent on energy supplies from the east (meaning Russia), as 80–90 % of its supplies come from the east, which clearly puts the Hungarian economic policy on an orbit. The relationship with Russia is also a choice of values. The relationship can have some advantages, a lot of things can arrive from the east, but for sure democracy and freedom are not among them. It is the responsibility of the leaders of today, in which direction the relationship [between Russia and Hungary] moves". This is a call for less dependence on one source. These words should come from the Prime Minister.

I wonder how recent decisions related to energy supplies are in line with this thinking. Nuclear is an important part of the energy mix. Why would the government sign a hurried and non-transparent agreement with Russia to refurbish the nuclear plant of Paks and sign another one to build a new reactor called Paks II, both without an international tender and without broad public debate? What exactly would prompt a government to classify for thirty years a commercial deal spanning in impact over generations? However knowing that Russia uses energy as a means to promote its political influence, why would the government make the country so vulnerable by entering into yet another agreement that inextricably ties its nuclear energy future to Russia? It is in the interest of the government to dispel beyond any doubt even the remotest possibility of corruption or Russian pressure. The government must exclude any possibility of corruption by making the deal transparent all the way through.

I wish Hungary was a country of transparency, a nation that is a poster-child of the fight against corruption, the cancer that is slowly sucking away our power, which destroys the immune system of the nation and in the end, tears apart the fabric of society.



It is important to understand that you cannot have it both ways: to be a close and trusted ally, and at the same time question the values which are fundamental to America and the European Union.

Why the United States Should Care

Mr. Chairman,

The reason why the United States should care is that in Central Europe today the internal threats to democracy and freedom are disturbing. Democratic backsliding and corruption, which seem to be two sides of the same equation, are a huge challenge and in some cases a threat to the achievements of the last twenty five years. The security provided by NATO and the incredible economic boost provided by EU membership, the values upon which these institutions are based seem to have been forgotten.

America and Americans have invested heavily in the freedom of Europe. Western Europe has the U.S. to thank for its freedom and that it was not subjected to another authoritarian regime after the defeat of Nazi Germany. But without the leadership of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Eastern Europe, including Hungary would still be behind an Iron Curtain, or without President Bill Clinton, NATO enlargement would not have happened. The U.S. has a huge stake in the safeguarding of freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe, in maintaining the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance. It has a vested interest in rejecting Russia's concept of spheres of influence, a concept without borders or constraints.

I can understand that Hungary's example presents a troubling dilemma: how to deal with democratic backsliding in democracies with apparently strong institutions and the rule of law. In the greater scheme of things, however Hungary is not just about Hungary, but is about the future of much of Central Europe and beyond. Membership in NATO and the European Union must mean the commitment to our common fundamental values, otherwise this could harm not just Hungary's long term interests but be detrimental to the prestige of the United States and Europe.

Mr. Chairman,

Hungary made a choice to be a democratic country 25 years ago. The United States should make it very clear that it continues to care that the principles of not just free but fair elections matter, that the fight against corruption and respect for human rights and equality cannot be done away with without consequences. I see a new generation of Hungarian politicians on the rise. Young people, the leaders of the future, with a strong set of convictions, who will one day be as determined to preserve Western values as Viktor Orbán once was. They know: a modern Hungary's future rests with the transatlantic community of shared values of freedom and democracy. They are watching today's debate with the utmost attention.

Thank you for your attention.